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AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP DIVERSITY

by

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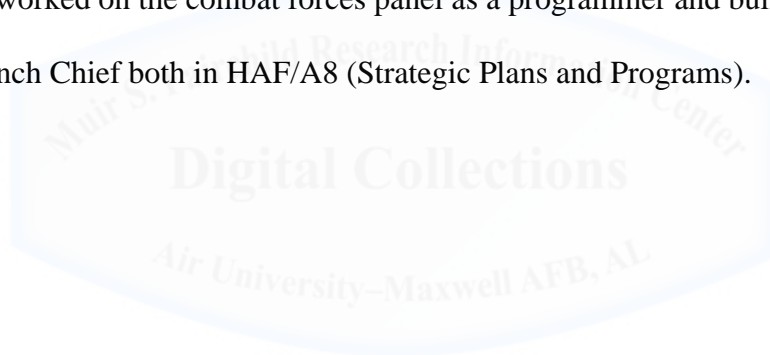
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Biography

Colonel Hall Sebren is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He grew up as part of an Air Force family, entered active duty in 1996, and is a career Aircraft Maintenance officer. He was a flight commander on multiple occasions was selected for the Logistics Career Broadening Program, twice commanded squadrons, and served as a deputy maintenance group commander. Following Air War College he will take command of the 8th Maintenance Group, Kunsan Air Base, Korea. Col Sebren has served in ACC, USAFE, AETC, AFMC, and PACAF. He has deployed in support of Operations SOUTHERN WATCH, ALLIED FORCE, IRAQI FREEDOM, ENDURING FREEDOM, and NEW DAWN. Col Sebren also worked on the combat forces panel as a programmer and built the FY15 POM as the Exercise Branch Chief both in HAF/A8 (Strategic Plans and Programs).



Abstract

The Air Force is not drawing upon its full talent pool for leadership in its most senior positions. This also has another negative affect of creating a general officer cohort that severely lacks diversity. Active duty general officer statistics bear out that the group is 94% white and only 7% female as opposed to the overall Air Force population that is 72% white and 20% female. While more diverse than in the past in terms of Air Force Specialty Code, the general officer cohort is 58% pilot officers, even though the promotion pool for selection to O-6 is only 30% pilot officers. Most people looking at that problem would conclude the problem is with the promotions boards, but the Air Force promotion system itself is not the problem. Leadership decisions to only allow officers selected for promotion from the below-the-promotion zone (BTZ) category to enter into the general officer ranks is one factor. That factor compounds with the Air Force's decision to limit the BTZ opportunity to roughly 3% when it could allow as much as 10% of the population to be BTZ-selectees produces a much smaller pool of officers for selection. Because there are such a high percentage of pilot officers in the general officer cohort this also limits the ability to increase diversity of race, background, gender, thought, experience, culture, and leadership as the pilot officer career field is one of the least diverse groups within the Air Force. It is time to look at different ways to select future general officers for the Air Force. There are many fully qualified and able officers in the mission support category that would be amazing representatives of the Air Force at all levels. We do not have to artificially limit them to capping out at O-6 if we want to encourage diversity in our most senior leadership levels as we seek to create a stronger Air Force that will continue to fulfill an increasingly complex mission.

Introduction

When Airmen hear the term diversity, we have been programmed, over time, to think about skin color and gender. The Air Force is trying to change this programming by adding other words to describe diversity: thought, background, and job specialty are a few. Adding these words and defining diversity differently is interesting and important, but we still struggle with getting even the “big three of race, gender, and ethnicity”¹ correct. We can see the Air Force’s lack of ‘big three’ diversity by looking at the general officer corps even as senior leaders within the Air Force mistakenly claim we are a microcosm of the country. The Air Force, writ large, most certainly is more diverse than it has been in the past, but diversity within senior leadership is still poor in terms of the big three and across Air Force Specialty Codes.

The Air Force has long touted that it selects the right person for the right job at the right time, but I am not sure it does. I find it interesting that as of 31 December 2016 the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance is a career fighter pilot, though he did command a reconnaissance wing beginning his 26th year of service. I must wonder why an intelligence officer or even a career reconnaissance pilot did not fill this position. In yet another example, the Air Force’s Chief Information Dominance and Chief Information Officer is not a communications or a cyber warfare officer but a career tanker and airlift pilot. His first experience with this work was also in his 26th year of service as the Director, Warfighter Systems Integration.² In fact, there has never been a cyber operator, space and missile operator, or special tactics officer as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, only pilot officers. Even the Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics and Engineering has been filled by at least two rated officers over the years even though there are many fully qualified logistics and engineering officers. Finally, all 27 officers who have filled the role of United States Air Force Academy

Commandant of Cadets have been rated officers. I believe this sends a clear message to cadets: if you want to be a general officer you better be a pilot. In an effort to provide full disclosure, the Academy has had two non-rated officers as its Superintendent since its inception but this still leaves leadership positions by non-pilot at the premier officer training ground woefully underrepresented.

Boards, Processes, and Policies

Promotion boards, administered by direction of Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2501, put forth the fairest process possible: there is no overt toleration for discrimination within the service. In fact, the Secretary of the Air Force swears in each board before it begins its work of selecting officers for promotion to the next higher grade. In keeping with the theme of fairness and equality, Airmen, in recent years, have been inundated with information regarding discrimination and diversity. In 2013 the Air Force published what it calls the Diversity Strategic Roadmap which lists five priorities for increasing diversity: Institutionalize (as necessary to mission success), Attract, Recruit, Develop, and Retain high-quality, talented and diverse individuals.³ Aside from this roadmap, a partial list of what Airmen have seen since just the year 2010 follows: **AFI 36-2707**, *Nondiscrimination in Programs and Activities Assisted or Conducted by the Department of the Air Force*, 16 Dec 2010; **AFI 36-7001**, *Diversity*, 20 Jul 2012; **AFPD 36-70**, *Diversity*, 13 Oct 2010; **DoDD 1020.02E**, *Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity in the DoD*, 8 June 2015; and **Executive Order 13583**, *Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce*, 18 Aug 2011. The Air Force specific documents alone are about 50 pages.

Reading through AFIs will give an outsider a sense the Air Force is all about diversity and inclusion. AFI 36-2707 talks through the normal rhetoric of non-discrimination in terms of

race, religion, sex, etc.: the demographics we have all heard about for years. Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD) 36-70 speaks directly about diversity defining it as “personal life experiences, geographic background, socioeconomic background, cultural knowledge, educational background, work background, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical/spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity and gender.”⁴ Finally, AFI 36-7001’s purpose is implementation of AFPD 36-70. AFI 36-7001 states explicitly “diversity provides our Total Force an aggregation of strengths, perspectives, and capabilities that transcends individual contributions. . . . [O]ur ability to attract a larger, highly talented, diverse pool of applicants for service with the Air Force, both military and civilian, and develop and retain our current personnel will impact our future Total Force.”⁵ By way of explanation, Total Force refers to the combination of Active Duty, Air Guard, and Air Force Reserve Forces.

While the Air Force is willing to create policy, tradition is not allowing the system to address the problem of diversity within its most senior positions. The Air Force is not doing as well with diversity as it believes it is doing. An observation of statistics encompassing the Air Force’s General Officer Corps, those officers in the ranks of O-7 through O-10 indicates that cohort of officers is 94% white and only 7% female. Since officer accessions have a much different demographic, the percentages listed above indicate there is some level of discrimination that happens as officers move up in rank from Second Lieutenant (O-1) through Lieutenant Colonel (O-5) and beyond.

Congress is as concerned with these dismal statistics as the Air Force is. House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-SC) has his eye on the diversity of senior officers within the Department of Defense as well. He said: “Just as our military looks like America, so too must our general officers. If minorities are asked to go into harm’s way, they must be allowed to lead

as well.”⁶ He is right, but his eye is only looking at race; he should also be looking at gender, diversity of thought, and the rest of the list included in AFPD 36-70 described above, which can be played out through promoting officers of many different Air Force specialties.

I contend the Air Force does well promoting diversity within its officer corps at the lower grades but fails to maintain that diversity beginning with promotion to O-5 because it promotes pilot officers below-the-promotion zone (BPZ) at a greater rate than mission support officers. This limits the diversity of our senior leader pool, as the pilot officer career field is the least diverse, in terms of ‘the big 3,’ as opposed to the mission support officer career fields, which are far more diverse. The current system creates this bias by creating a shift in ‘majority rule’ as officers move from the O-5 and O-6 ranks towards general officer ranks. As an example, 58% of the general officer corps is pilot officers. Yet, from 2012 through 2016 pilot officers made up only 30% of the eligible pool for promotion to Colonel in the below-the-promotion zone category. Mission support officers made up 37% of the same promotion boards.

Make Up and Organization of the Air Force

Demographics

According to the census bureau, there are roughly 320 million people in the United States. Females are about 51% of the population. In terms of race, the United States is 77% white, 13% black, and 5% Asian the rest of the population is either Native American or declares a mixed race status.⁷ The Hispanic/Latino label is an ethnic label not a race label, so numbers representing this type of diversity, which certainly important, cannot be measured relevant to race. By contrast the Air Force is just over 20% female and in terms of race is 72% white, 14% black and about 4% Asian with the remaining population indicating Native American, Hawaiian, mixed race and/or declined to respond.⁸ According to these statistics, females are vastly underrepresented in the Air Force; however, the Air Force is a little less white, a little more black, and little less Asian than the general population.

When looking at the grade or rank make-up of the Air Force, Department of Defense data indicates there are 60,634 officers in the Air Force: 286 general officers, 3,292 colonels, 9,557 lieutenant colonels, 12,958 majors, 20,736 captains, 7,260 first lieutenants and 6,545 second lieutenants.⁹ According to the Air Force, there are 313,722 active duty Air Force members: 60,961 Officer and 252,761 Enlisted. The difference in numbers between Department of Defense (DoD) data and Air Force data is likely due to which month data was pulled. Of the officer corps, in the captain through lieutenant colonel ranks, about 17,400 are rated flying officers (12,700 pilot, 3,300 navigator, and 1,400 air battle manager) and roughly 24,200 non-rated officers make up the remaining AFSCs. While the pilot officer cohort is the largest specialty within the general officer corps, it is also the least diverse group with only 7% of the cohort being either female (n=4) or non-white (n=7). The next lowest cohort is the navigator

specialty at 14% diverse; female (n=0) or non-white (n=2). The mission support cohort contains 68 general officers and is 26% female (n=12) or non-white (n=6). Before diving any deeper into the details it is appropriate to look at some demographics.

All officers are required to have a 4-year college degree and earn their commission through one of four methods: Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), and Officer Training School (OTS), or through a direct appointment. ROTC produced 42.5% of the officer corps, 22.8% earned commissions through USAFA, 17.6% through OTS, and 17.2% through direct commission.¹⁰ The commissioning source breakout on the general officer cohort shows 48% commissioned through ROTC, 44% through USAFA and 7% through OTS. This may indicate increasing diversity within the commissioning sources, especially USAFA, would eventually translate to increased diversity in the general officer cohort.

These officers, regardless of their commissioning source, make up the leadership of the Air Force. While there are certainly a great many enlisted leaders within the Air Force, only a member of the commissioned officer corps is given the privilege of commanding men and women in service to our country as part of the operational Air Force.

Air Force Structure and Command Time Disparity

Operationally, the Air Force is organized in the wing, group, squadron, and flight structure moving from largest organization to smallest. Using a typical wing as an example, the

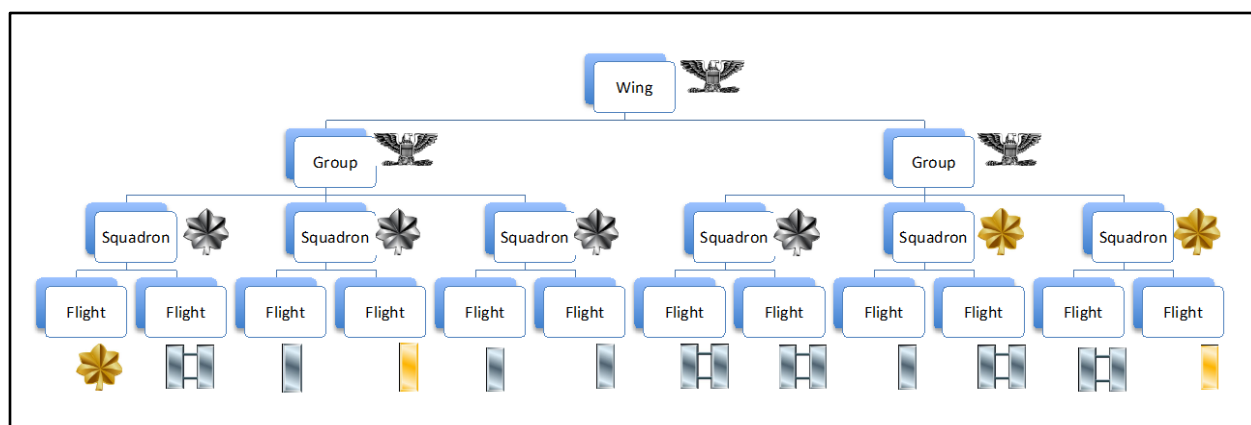


Figure 1. Notional Air Force Wing Organizational Chart showing Wing-to-Flight levels

Air Force *generally* has company grade officers (lieutenants and captains) or Senior Non-Commissioned Officers running flights. Field grade officers (majors and lieutenant colonels) command squadrons, and colonels command groups. More senior colonels or junior brigadier generals command wings. Using the 35th Fighter Wing as an example, the wing is commanded by a pilot officer who is a colonel and consists of 4 groups (Maintenance Group, Medical Group, Mission Support Group, and Operations Group) and 16 squadrons within those groups. The Maintenance Group, commanded by a maintenance officer colonel, consists of two squadrons, each commanded by a major or lieutenant colonel maintenance officer. The Medical Group, commanded by a medical officer, consists of five squadrons commanded by lieutenant colonels in the Medical Service Corps or Bio-Medical Corps. The Mission Support Group, commanded by a support officer, has six squadrons commanded by either majors or lieutenant colonels across a number of career fields. Lastly, the Operations Group, commanded by a pilot officer, is made up of three squadrons commanded by Lieutenant Colonel pilot officers.¹¹

Officers who operate in the structure laid out above have an advantage over officers who do not since they will have the opportunity to command, an important prerequisite for promotion and especially for early promotion. In the Army a premium is placed on command starting at the O-3 level, which they call Company Command. “Branches require officers to obtain command

at the company level before being considered a branch-qualified company grade officer.”¹² The equivalent level in the Air Force is called Flight Command.

It is at this flight command level where the difference in leadership experience between rated and non-rated officers starts to accrue. According to the general officer data collected for this paper, just over half of the pilot officers have lead a flight, and those who have did so for an average of 10 months. Conversely, the average A4/7 officer (maintenance, logistics readiness, civil engineer, and security forces officer compilation) has led 2 flights for an average total time in command of 29 months. At the squadron level the data indicates pilot officers have commanded one squadron for 20 months time in command. The average A4/7 officer has commanded at the squadron-level 1.5 times with 30 months time in command. At the group-level just over half of pilot officers have commanded a group and did so for 11 months whereas the A4/7 officers average one group for 18.5 months. Finally, at the wing-level pilot officers average 1.5 wings for 30 months and A4/7 officers 1.3 wings for 28 months. All told, through wing command, the pilot officer will have accumulated roughly 72 months of time in command as compared to the A4/7 officer who has accumulated 107 months; a difference of nearly 3 years of command experience. The data indicate the A4/7 officer meets the test of ability to serve in the higher grade, as discussed previously.

Not only is the amount of time in leadership a distinctive contrast between pilots and other officers, but there is also a distinction in the depth of leadership experiences. In then-Colonel Russell Mack’s work, he lists six of what he calls prerequisites for promotions. On top of the Goldwater-Nichols-directed joint qualifications, which are outside the scope of my work, he lists the most important prerequisites as BPZ promotion, but also includes command time. He goes on to say for pilots “limited command opportunities occur later in an officer’s

development—typically as a lieutenant colonel, squadron commander—their first true test of leadership.”¹³ This is an interesting distinction because for the support officer, particularly the A4/7 officer, command at the flight-level is a true test of leadership, and it happens as early as second lieutenant. For the A4/7 officer, squadron command usually occurs first as a major with a second larger squadron as a lieutenant colonel. Challenges at the squadron level are also not equivalent. The average F-16 squadron has fewer than 50, generously estimated, officers and airmen with the vast majority being other pilot officers. The average maintenance squadron has 450 Airmen, Officers, and Civilians with the vast majority being young enlisted Airmen. Based on total numbers of Airmen, diversity of career fields, and much lower manning percentage, when compared to a fighter squadron, non-rated officers have more challenges and also more difficult challenges. This is not to say leading a fighter squadron is easy or unimportant, but the complexity is not equivalent and certainly the age at which officers are exposed to leadership opportunities is vastly different and better prepares support officers for the challenge of leadership at the next higher level.

Misawa’s 35th Fighter Wing provides a real world example illustrating how this time and depth of leadership would benefit the day-to-day operations and overall mission success. There are roughly 3,500 people assigned to this wing. Of that number, only about 100 are pilots. The rest of the wing is made up of various Air Force specialties and performs a number of functions, so leading this type of wing is more like running a small city. The maintenance and support groups are usually about two thirds of the wing in terms of population and functions within a wing. Officers within those groups deal with the challenges of the flying mission in addition to the other challenges of running the rest of the wing. Pilot officers are not afforded this opportunity as they are focused on learning their craft and honing their combat skills each day.

Again, they have an important task indispensable to completing the mission of our Air Force. However, those skills do not necessarily transfer to being able to run a city. Recall the promotion system is looking to “select officers through a fair and competitive selection process that advances the best qualified officers to positions of increased responsibility and authority.”¹⁴ If the Air Force is looking for an officer to serve in the next higher grade, it might make more sense to promote an officer who has dealt with far more wing functions than just the flying mission. Yet we see the pilot officer promoted early to O-5 at a rate slightly over twice the rate of a support officer even though the pilot officer has not even had an opportunity to command at the squadron level and may not have even been a flight commander.

The Break Down

The Air Force preaches zero tolerance for discrimination, and according to the most recent version of AFI 36-2501 (para 2.1, 16 Jun 2004) says:

A promotion is not a reward for past service; it is advancement to a higher grade based on past performance and future potential. The fundamental purpose of the officer promotion program is to select officers through a fair and competitive selection process that advances the best qualified officers to positions of increased responsibility and authority and provides the necessary career incentive to attract and maintain a quality officer force.¹⁵

Nowhere in that direction is there an indication a particular AFSC should be promoted at a higher rate than another, but it is happening. I will assume, since the promotion boards are set up with the same diversity as that of the records they are scoring, that that system as it stands is as neutral and unbiased as it can be.

This means discrimination must occur prior to the boards, mostly likely in the form of wing commanders granting higher stratifications to pilots than mission support officers on their yearly officer performance reports. Since the Air Force only selects a very small percentage of officers for early promotion at any one board, and the board only sees what is written on an

officer's performance report or promotion recommendation form, a wing commander has tremendous power that can determine whether an officer is promoted or not and most certainly influences whether that officer is promoted early or not. Stratification levels of less than the top 5% of a pool of officers would easily keep an officer from being selected early to a particular grade/rank.

As Mack indicated, BPZ promotions are **required** for eventual selection to general officer grades. Officers have two BPZ opportunities: one in-the-promotion zone (IPZ) opportunity, and unlimited above-the-promotion zone (APZ) opportunities for promotion to O-5 and O-6. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the BPZ statistics as the Air Force general officer corps is essentially comprised of 100% BPZ officers. Mr. Greg Lowrimore, from the Air Force Colonels Group (also known as DPO), briefed at the Air War College on November 1, 2016 about promotion information to Brigadier General and indicated for the 2014 promotion board "79% are 2 grades BPZ, 21% are 1 grade BPZ, and 0% never BPZ."¹⁶ We can look to then-Colonel Mack's *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow* to see how the other services value BPZ promotion. The Army statistics show 37% of its 1-stars were not BPZ, the Marine Corps data shows zero were promoted to any grade early, and for the Navy, 55% of its 1-stars had never been promoted early. This is in stark contrast to the Air Force that "by comparison, has not selected an on-time colonel for promotion to brigadier general. . . [E]very one of them has been promoted at least one year early."¹⁷ Promoting in this manner comes at a cost to diversity at the Air Force General Officer level. Another CLS Senior Leader agrees with me. During his briefing he said, "some of you will be promoted to general officer and should not be and some of you will not be promoted to general officer but should be. It's just the way it is."¹⁸

The Air Force limits itself on the number of people it promotes early by nearly 7 percentage points per year. Authority for promotion boards and BPZ opportunities are initially laid out within AFI 36-2501 which says “BPZ promotions provide an opportunity for accelerated promotion of officers who are exceptionally well qualified as specified by 10 U.S.C. 616(b).”¹⁹ 10 U.S. Code § 616(b) does not specifically call out qualifications for officers to be promoted BPZ. It only tells the Secretary of Defense and the Service Secretary a percentage of officers that may be promoted early. A Service Secretary only has the authority to authorize up to a 10% early selection rate on a given board and the Secretary of Defense cannot authorize more than 15% on a given board.²⁰ Air Force promotion board statistics from 1989 to 2016 show BPZ selection on average for O-5 and O-6 was only 3.3 and 3.0% respectfully. The most recent boards for O-5 (2012-2016) show a BPZ selection average of 3.4% and for promotion to O-6 (2012-2016) a 3.0% selection rate.²¹

In terms of total numbers, the Air Force promoted 468 pilot officers and only 190 support officers to be candidates for potential general officer grades from 2012 to 2016. For the O-5 selection boards, pilot officers were promoted BPZ at an average rate of 4.9% where mission support officers were promoted at an average rate of 2.4%. For the O-6 boards, pilot officers were promoted at an average rate of 4.3% and support officers at an average rate of 2.1%.

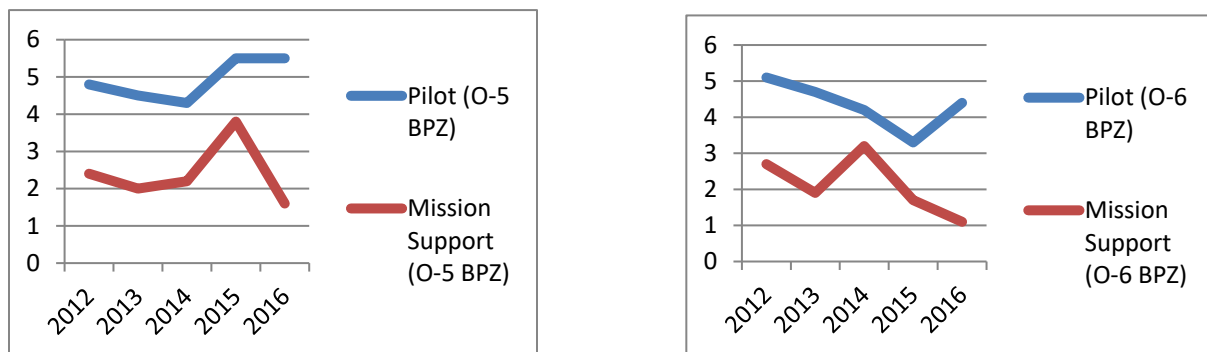


Figure 2. BPZ selection rates 2012 – 2016 Pilot versus Mission Support

This is significant because by promoting pilots, who make up a smaller percentage of officers compared to mission support officers at a rate of twice as much, the Air Force changed the dynamic of the available pool of officers eligible for promotion to O-7. Mathematically speaking, this effect all but assures the general officer corps will be mostly filled with pilot officers, and therefore white males, given the most likely case for becoming a general officer is being promoted to multiple grades early.

General Officer Data

Since Air Force A1/DPG was unwilling to provide statistical data on the general officers, all information was derived from the Air Force home page biographies section. There is some inherent bias when collecting data in this way as not all officers operate in the wing, group, and squadron structure common to most of the Air Force. However, general officer data gathered using a general officer roster provided by the Air War College shows of the 266 active duty, line-of-the-Air Force, general officers 94% (n=250) are white and 7% (n=19) are female. As indicated previously, the general officer corps is 58% (n=156) pilot officers with the next highest number of general officers in the collective coming from the A4/7 community making up 7.8% (n=21) of the general officer cohort.

Not all officers operate in the wing, group, and squadron construct, so comparing time in command across different career fields is difficult. Also, acquisition officers do not hold G-series orders when they are placed in a squadron-, group-, or wing-equivalent position as directed in AFI 51-604, *Appointment to and Assumption of Command*. Trying to account for command-like time for those officers would not provide an appropriate comparison mechanism to other line officers. This drove me to compile data differently than the Air Force. The Air Force combines acquisitions, A4/7, and support officers in a category called the mission support officer. For the

purpose of this paper, I grouped officers into the following categories: pilot, navigator, air battle manager, space and missile operator, acquisitions, A4/7 (maintenance, civil engineer, logistics readiness, security forces), support (communications, comptroller, contracting, personnel and public affairs), and other (office of special investigations (OSI) and special tactics/combat rescue officer).

Diversity and why the AF senior leadership is not as diverse as it could be

During a Commander's Leadership Seminar (CLS) briefing at the Air War College, a senior officer stated diversity was one of the main problems the Air Force has to solve and that the Air Force needs to "reduce unconscious bias" and "not like us isn't just skin color."²² This is a refreshing stance on where the Air Force might be heading in the future. We can look to Jeff Smith's *Tomorrow's Air Force: Tracing the Past, Shaping the Future* to get a glimpse of how the make up of our most senior leadership cohort has changed over time. In his work he looked at the Air Force 3- and 4-star officers from 1960 through 2010. He was looking to trace what caused the shift from a focus on bomber pilot generals to fighter pilot generals and then sought to predict what our future 3- and 4-star general officer corps might look like. In his work he shows the change in time with reference to non-rated generals as well. I will group his work differently though and combine bomber fighter and airlift pilots into a single 'pilot' group.

	1960	1975	1990	1992	2001	2010
Pilot	89%	89%	75%	75%	87%	97%
Non-rated	11%	11%	25%	25%	13%	3%

Table 1. Percentage of pilot versus non-rated 3- and 4-star Air Force General Officers²³

As of December 2016 there were 54 generals in the 3- and 4-star grades: 70% were rated officers and 30% were non-rated. This is a drastic change from the 2010 numbers posted by Smith. Also of note, in 2016 there were 6 female officers in the top two general officer ranks. Having females in the 4-star rank is new, and I think a step in the correct direction. Interestingly,

of the three female 4-stars the Air Force has selected (2 remain on active duty), none are/were pilot officers. One is an Air Battle Manager and the other two are/were Acquisitions Officers. I believe this demonstrates the Air Force is on the right path, at least in terms of selecting more female officers for promotion to its senior levels. Since females are a smaller percentage of the overall Air Force make-up, it is not enough to just promote non-rated females to truly address the diversity issue. The Air Force must look at the problem holistically.

Bias remains. During a different but also recent CLS lecture, I asked another Air Force Senior leader, who was a pilot, whether an Air Force Logistics Officer could lead the J-4 (DoD's Joint Logistics function) or USTRANSCOM since both positions are exclusively about logistics. His answer surprised me as he said, "Could a logistics officer make better decisions than I did? Sure. Would a logistics officer make different decision than I did? Sure. But you'd have to find a logistics officer with an operational mindset."²⁴ I found this response somewhat disheartening as he indicated a logistics officer, whose sole purpose in her career is thinking in an operational mindset, might not think operationally. This bias is not a unique issue when speaking with pilot officers.

Smith, a former Air Force pilot, surveyed a number of different officers across a multitude of AFSCs and grades/ranks with one of the questions being "Within the Air Force Officer corps, there is an unwritten "culture" that places more importance and prestige on some AFSCs over others." The response to this question was a unanimous yes with pilot officers ranked number 1 of 5 and support officers ranked number 5 of 5. This can be contrasted with his findings that most officers believed unconventional war was more likely to occur in the future, which would require different leadership skills than present. Even though there was recognition

that the nature of war was likely to change, Smith still found that 62% of fighter pilot officers still believed “fighter pilots are best qualified to hold senior leadership positions.”²⁵

This bias that pilot officers, regardless of the leadership requirements and their depth and breadth of leadership experiences, are the best choice for future leadership positions is what the Air Force’s diversity program should be trying to overcome. In her work Morris states “an inclusive organization recognizes and capitalizes from the varied perspectives and approaches each individual within the organization provides.”²⁶ Morris refers to cognitive diversity, commonly called diversity of thought. In this regard, Scott Page, in his book *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, makes the case that training has a big influence on how we see things, and our experiences shape the things we want or need to learn. Further, he relates we can expect “identity differences lead to experiential differences that in turn create tool differences.”²⁷ We can extract that to the different identities within the Air Force. We already know that in general the pilot officer group believes regardless of the situation the pilot officer is the most capable leader to solve a problem or achieve a goal. Knowing this it is not tough to see why a wing commander, who is a pilot, would then rank his pilot squadron commanders 1, 2, 3 over other equally capable mission support officers thereby giving those pilot officers a much greater chance of achieving promotion to the general officer corps that, in turn, creates the lack of diversity, and likely a lack of available “tools” needed to address the ever-changing mission in our most senior leaders.

Recommendations

Institutionally, the Air Force is not using its talent pool to its full potential. It is choosing the officers with the least amount of time-in-command for the most senior positions. Because of this, it is no wonder the Air Force has a hard time changing culture or making large shifts in how

it does business since learning the abilities to affect those kinds of changes takes time and practice beginning at the flight level. The future pilot officers destined to be general officers are moved so quickly through the squadron and group levels (if even given an opportunity to command a group), they have not developed the skill sets to effectively lead large organizations and most certainly have not gained the skills necessary to lead a large organization through change. I go back to the example of the Air Force's current CIO, a pilot. The Air Force wants to be the home of cyber for DoD but what would the other services think about us putting a non-cyber person in charge of cyber. Probably the same thing they thought when the Air Force sent a pilot to be the head of the J-4 instead of one of our more qualified Air Force logistics officers.

Based on the demonstrated desire of the Air Force to only promote BPZ officers to the general officer corps and no clear indication it will change that policy in the future, the Air Force could instead increase the percentage of officers promoted early. As indicated by the roughly 3% early rate from 1989 to present, the Air Force has limited the size of the pool of officers from which to choose for general officer advancement by about 7% each year. Promoting more total officers early would allow early promotion opportunities for more mission support officers to join the pool of high potential officers competing for the general officer corps. Increasing early promotion opportunities would not only increase the total pool of officers but also the diversity of the pool since the majority of minority and female officers are in the support categories, as defined by the Air Force. As an example, in 2016 the Air Force selected 118 majors for promotion from a pool of 3,497 for early promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. By law the Air Force could have promoted nearly 350 officers early, expanding the pool of potential general officers by nearly 230 officers in a single year.

There is a draw back to expanding the pool in that way. The services have a ceiling on the number of people who can be on active duty in a specific grade/rank at any one time. This cap covers both officer and enlisted Airmen within the Air Force. Should the Air Force Secretary choose to promote more officers early, as she is authorized to by law, she would have to also promote fewer officers from the IPZ boards. This would create a delicate balancing act and might have second and third order consequences not readily identifiable. Starting by increasing the early promotion rate to 4 or 5% might be more prudent.

While not covered in this study, I would recommend AF/A1 look at officer performance reports to see how often pilot officers are stratified higher than mission support officers. Anecdotally, in the two wings in which I have been privy to see the stratification layout, the wing commander has ranked the pilot officer squadron commanders 1, 2, and 3 followed by the mission support officers at 4 and lower. I found this most interesting when one of the support officer commanders had exceeded all mission goals in terms of mission, had the best administrative statistics, and was even selected for a Major Command-level award for his superior work and yet given the 4th stratification behind a pilot officer commander whose command was not meeting mission requirements and had some of the lowest administrative statistics. This situation occurred over a 3-year period across two different wings in two different Major Commands.

To counter this phenomenon, another method the Air Force could use to increase the diversity of the pool of potential general officers is to create a different stratification technique more similar to how the Air Force constructs the Reduction in Force boards. For those boards the PRF-equivalent form has a block where the officer is compared only against other officers in

her specific AFSC and also in her specific promotion year group. In this way though the officers are stove piped into competitive bins, it allows a true apples to apples comparison.

None of this is likely to happen though until the Air Force decides pilot officers, while very talented leaders in their own right, are not the only talented leaders. Former Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General (ret.) Larry Spencer said, “Who says that senior positions need to be held by those that are operators? Obviously a lot of them do, but why do so many of them need to be? That’s always been a little bit controversial.”²⁸ When the Air Force understands there are talented leaders across the entire spectrum of the officer corps and that understanding boils down to the operational wings, then I think we will see some change. The Air Force will then have more ideas and different ideas to approaching and solving its problems. In the end, I conclude it is not the promotion boards that are the issue: it is the wing commanders and other senior raters who cannot get passed the idea that someone other than a pilot officer can be the number one officer at a base or in a pool of officers contending for promotion to the next higher grade.

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Notes

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